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Pop-Culture Essay

Japanese Horror is influenced by and reflects the Culture and History of Japan.

In this paper, I will discuss about Japanese Horror and how it reflects religious concepts and how it is relevant, affects, and reflects aspects of Japanese Culture. In our lessons, we went over many concepts about Japanese Culture and its influence. Japanese horror movies like *Ringu* and *Ju-on* both had a great impact on modern pop-culture, to the point where they were localized and remade for American audiences. These movies displayed many aspects of Japanese mythology and became widely popular, while reflecting religious beliefs. Another instance of Japanese culture influencing horror movies was a set of traditional ghost stories being made into a movie; one of which was a story titled *Hoichi the Earless*. The fact that a mythological religious story, which heavily features Japanese history as well, was relevant enough to be made into a movie supports my point. This story in particular features a heavy influence of Japanese religion and history. Japanese culture, mythology, and religious beliefs are still currently influencing the pop-culture of today, evidenced in the anime show *Yokai Watch*, which is being used to encourage Japanese tourism in Hawaii. The main character, *Jibanyan*, of the popular anime and video game has been turned into a *Yuruchara*, likened to the mascot characters of different prefecture that are used to improve tourism. Through this essay, I will discuss these points and how they tie into Japanese Pop-Culture.

*Hoichi the Earless*

For the first part of my essay, I am going to discuss the story of Hoichi the Earless. The story is about Hoichi, a blind minstrel who excelled at playing the Biwa. Since he is blind, he lives at a temple with his friend who is a priest. He is approached by a samurai to play the Tale of the Heike for the samurai’s lord. This continues over several evenings, and his friend the priest notices his absences. When he has Hoichi followed, it is discovered that he has been playing for ghosts in a graveyard nearby and he has been bewitched by those ghosts. The priest determines to save his friend by painting the Heart Sutra, a famous Buddhist Sutra, all over Hoichi’s body in order to hide and protect him from the ghosts. Hoichi is instructed to sit silent and still, to hide his presence from the ghosts when they arrive that evening to lure Hoichi away. However, the priest forgot to paint the Sutra on Hoichi’s ears, so when the ghost samurai came for him, only his ears were visible. The samurai, having been instructed by his lord to bring Hoichi with him, rips off Hoichi’s ears as the only proof of Hoichi available. Despite losing his ears, Hoichi is saved from the ghosts and becomes a famous minstrel.

This story heavily reflects aspects of Buddhism, as well as Japanese history, as evidenced by Hoichi’s telling the Tale of the Heike, which is based of of historical events and was written by a blind monk named Kakuishi in 1371[[1]](#footnote-1). In Jolyon Baraka Thomas’s article, *Shûkyô Asobi*, she talks about how religion and entertainment in Japan are related. She also talks about how the “distinction between popular entertainment and religion [is] artificial”[[2]](#footnote-2) and, using Hayao Miyazaki movies and investigating audience’s response to those movies, is able to determine that “religious and playful media or action can result in the creation of entirely new religious doctrines, interpretations, rituals, and beliefs3”. This supports my ideas in the sense that I believe that Religious aspects being carried across into entertainment helps to increase the longevity of those customs and to make those religions relatable to those who might not know or take part in those religions. Thomas goes on to state in her article,

“the term *shûkyô asobi*8 to describe[s] this area of Japanese religious culture. *Shûkyô asobi* is a conflation of religion and entertainment which: (1) can be viewed as religious in its production or consumption; (2) can also be said to be one of the many alternative strategies for negotiating spiritual needs in post-war and postmodern social circumstances;9 (3) draws upon, but also modifies, existing religious themes;10 (4) can have a moral or spiritual effect on the audience, including an effect on how people view or practice religion, not necessarily limited to sect or a specific doctrine;11 (5) allows for oscillations between religion and entertainment while nevertheless referring to the space where the two overlap; and (6) therefore isolates those moments where entertainment experiences provide the impetus or environment for religious learning or behavior, or where religious doctrine, ritual and pedagogy act as modes of entertainment.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

She goes on later on in the article, talking about how movie watching can also assume a religious function, which supports my point that religion is a part of Japanese culture and is able to influence said culture through entertainment. When religion is viewed through entertainment, not only does it leave a video of the practices and rituals involved behind, it also makes it possible for others to view and learn from them. By doing so, it is able to revitalize the information and make it relevant to modern culture once again.

*Ringu*

In the next section I am going to talk about Japanese horror movies like *Ringu* (also known as ‘The Ring’) and *Ju-on* (also known as ‘The Grudge’). First is the movie *Ringu*, which was based off of a novel written by Koji Suzuki. The story is about a journalist who finds and watches a video tape that is cursed by a girl who was killed unjustly. Before she was killed, the girl who had a grudge against the world, used her supernatural psychic power to cast a curse upon the video tape so that anyone who watches it will die in seven days. The journalist’s child accidentally watches the tape too, so they try to save their child with the help of their ex, who has also seen the tape. As it turns out, the curse cannot be stopped. The father is in his room on the seventh day since he watched the tape, and the TV suddenly gets turned on automatically, and he sees a well in the middle of the screen. A girl crawls out of the well and crawls out of the screen if the TV. Encountered by the ghost of the girl, who stares at him with rage. The father then dies, like all other previous victims, due to extreme terror and has a heart attack. The Journalist learns that in order to cheat the curse, whoever watches the tape must make a copy of it and show it to someone else. Only through passing on the curse to another can one survive. The movie gained great popularity, so much so that it was remade by both America and Korea, as well as having a sequel in both Japan and America. In Hong’s article, *The Ring goes to different cultures: A call for cross cultural studies of religious horror films*, he states that,

“the Ring series itself is a cultural product with much cultural power, [with the] definition of cultural power as the capacity of certain works to linger in the mind [and] enter the Canon, it's difficult to argue that ‘the young female ghost crawling out of the TV screen’ as a cultural icon does not have immense cultural power”[[4]](#footnote-4).

The image of the girl follows Japanese tradition of showing the ghosts of wronged females as vengeful spirits in all white with long black hair. This visual imagery is the way many female ghosts have been historically portrayed, and by showing that in a movie that gained such popularity, it is able to perpetuate and continue old Japanese cultural concepts into new Japanese pop culture. These types of female ghosts have been in stories since the Edo Period and, similar to *Hoichi the Earless*, appeared in ghost stories of old. This ties in with my earlier point the Japanese historical concepts can be carried into current pop culture, with horror movies serving as a medium.

*Ju-on*

The second movie, *Ju-on* (The Grudge) was released in 2003, and has similar imagery of *Ringu*, with the ghost being clothed in white and having black hair. The story features a house that is cursed by the ghosts haunting it. A husband finds out his wife is in love with someone else, and kills her and their son. Her ghost in turn kills him, and any subsequent people who set foot in the cursed home. Even when one girl managed to run away, her two friends who she left behind to die, turned around and haunted and killed her as vengeance for her abandoning them. The people who are killed are then turned into vengeful spirits themselves. This movie also became popular enough to travel overseas and be remade. In another article, by Valerie Wee, she states that, “in all these ghost tales, the vengeful spirits of these dead women return to wreak vengeance on their murderers, and in some instances, on society as a whole”[[5]](#footnote-5), which is thoroughly represented in this movie.

The female ghost idea and aesthetic of Japan is very distinct, and through these two movies, it is shown how these historical aspects of Japanese culture are translated into modern Japanese pop culture through Horror. Movies have a great ability to share and carry on aspects of culture that otherwise might be lost due to age or time, and are able to make new again those cultural aspects. Japan is especially unique in its preservation of old cultural and religious practices, and I feel that it is important to continue preserving and revitalizing Japanese culture this way.

*Yokai: Yokai Watch*

The next aspect of Japanese culture that I am going to talk about it Yokai. The term “Yokai” means “Demon” in Japanese. However, Japanese yokai are not the same as what westerners would consider Demons. They are creatures or spirits that are neither good nor bad. They can be helpful or harmful to humans, and there are hundreds of different kinds of Yokai. In Japanese mythology, ordinary inanimate objects can become Yokai, as well as animals becoming Yokai. Yokai are also often a part of Japanese religious stories from Japanese mythology, while also having a moral to the story in some instances. With the advances of technology, Japanese people have kept that rich religious and mythological history alive by using demons in all sorts of stories, movies and tv shows. One such tv show is called ‘Yokai Watch’. Yokai Watch is a multimedia franchise that started with a video game, and then moved on to create a manga and an amine based off of it. This franchise is geared towards children, which also helps to inform children about religious and cultural aspects of Japanese history, while making it fun. When the first game came out, it became hugely popular, to the point where it became known across Japan while spreading to other countries, like America and Europe. Even the creator of the franchise Akihiro Hino said, “While I did believe that it would get its break, honestly, to have it come this far, where the children of Japan would get so hopped-up on youkai, to the point where all the goods would sell out, is something I didn’t expect”[[6]](#footnote-6). Recently, in 2015, the main Yokai character of the game and show, Givañan, was made into a Yurukyara and officially appointed a Goodwill Ambassador to the Hawaii State Tourism Bureau[[7]](#footnote-7). Yurukyara is a term for Japanese Mascots that represent an area or region in Japan. In Caroline Tan’s article she wrote, “

“Yurukyara also reaches out to the public and communicates to them through social media as well as public events such as sports and games organized by the local governments to help increase the awareness and establish the relationship between the public and the respective yurukyara (Suzuki, 2012). These efforts have [borne] fruit as the number of visitors have shot up whenever the yurukyara makes a public appearance at a public event, particularly children and the elderly (Hughes, 2010; Suzuki, 2012).”[[8]](#footnote-8).

This statement coincides with my point that by using a traditionally Japanese Horror idea, you are able to make it relevant to Japanese modern pop culture. By using a character who is popular and then turning around and making them a symbol for another thing, it helps to spread the different aspects of that character to other areas. This character who is based on Japanese historical ideas is able to perpetuate the concept of Japanese pop culture. This also ties into my next point which is about contents tourism.

Philip Seaton and Takayoshi Yamamura wrote an article on contents tourism stating, “Worldwide there is growing interest in the ways that films, novels, comics, games and other forms of popular culture act as tourism drivers, for example, when fans go to the locations of favorite television...”[[9]](#footnote-9), which follows with the idea that, Japan is using the characters of Yokai Watch to increase Japanese people’s interest Hawaii, in order to boost tourism. By using the popularity of a Yokai character in specific, which is based on a historical Japanese concept, they are not only creating more interest in the character, but making traditional Japanese culture into modern pop culture.

In conclusion, through the usage of Japanese Horror, Traditional Japanese Culture is made into Modern Japanese Pop Culture. The Japanese horror involved, from the story of *Hoichi the Earless*, *Ringu*, *Ju-on*, and *Yokai Watch*, incorporates different aspects of what I learned in class, from Japanese Religion, Yurukyara, and Contents Tourism. The three Japanese Horror movies focused mainly on Japanese Religion, while Yokai Watch was a part of Yurukyara and Contents Tourism.

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